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# Elegance & Espionage

**Aline, Countess of Romanones, looks back at her life as a spy for the OSS in 'The Spy Wore Red'**

By LINDA YGLESIAS

**H**ER FLAME-RED coat fans like a matador's cape. It creates the slightest stir of air. She is walking quickly. When she sits, she casts the profile of aristocracy. Three lamps give off a yellow haze against her tan, unpainted cheeks.

She describes how it feels to kill a man.

"Whether you're killing, or you're under the impression that you may have..." muses Aline, Countess of Romanones, wrapping her fingers around a silver-handled teapot. "The worst fear is anticipating someone's about to come out of nowhere and try to choke you or jab a needle into you. All that's flashing before you is staying alive."

Read her book, *"The Spy Wore Red"* (Random House, \$18.95), about her days of espionage and you'll see how difficult staying alive was for her.

During World War II, the member of the Best Dressed Hall of Fame, confidante to the Duchess of Windsor, was Aline Griffith, a banker's daughter from Pearl River, N.Y., who became an agent for the American OSS. Code name: "Tiger."

Little did Aline Griffith realize when modeling in Manhattan that a blind dinner date from the War Department would ultimately place her in the center of the danger and continental glitz.

As one of two female recruits in the country's first OSS training school, the French major from Mount St. Vincent's-on-the-Hudson, a Catholic girls' school, was taken to a secret site called "The Farm," where she was given a three-month espionage blitz.

Her mission took her to Madrid in 1944, where she

spent the war years infiltrating a high-society German spy operation that had direct intelligence links to Hitler and threatened the Allied invasion. She not only exposed members of the Axis-espionage set but came close to death when she trailed a mole in her own organization.

**I**F "THE SPY Wore Red" is a day-by-day account of sneaking into bedrooms to photograph German documents, passing secrets at the Prado Museum, reporting to agents with code names "Top Hat," "Whiskey," "Sphinx," "Mozart" and "Melon," and running from assassins' bullets, it is also a seductive journey through flamenco cafes and bullfight rings.

One night beautiful young Aline, swathed in red, escaped in the dead of night through the woods. Reading the countess' account of how she pulled her Beretta .25 from her evening bag and ruined her long red cotton Hattie Carnegie, the one with the "triangular cutout above the waist" that "reveals a minuscule bare midriff," it seems that either the countess has read a lot of Barbara Cartland, or she breezed through spying as cavalierly as a paso doble.

Yet that, insists the author, who claims she has never really read a spy novel, is exactly the point of "The Spy Wore Red." "This was real spying," she says, munching peanut-buttered raisin toast that she has asked Fernando, the butler, in flawlessly lisped Castilian, to bring with tea. "We used to drop truth powders in drinks at dinner parties," she says, adding, "Not everything in spying is brilliant and cautious. There were such corny things as wearing an identifying carnation in your lapel. My story is the way it really was."

Though the CIA declined to comment on the countess or her escapades, a former OSS agent remembers, especially, one incident in the countess' past. Geoffrey Jones, now the president of the Veterans of OSS, was behind the lines, preparing for the Allied landing in the South of France. Though he didn't know her identity at the time, "Aline was the source who gave a double agent disinformation that the landing would be at Marseille instead of Cannes," he reflects. Jones didn't meet the countess until after the war.

After Madrid, the countess continued spying. In France and Switzerland, she set up espionage networks and recruited agents. She didn't retire her revolver until 1947, when she married the green-eyed Spanish Count of Romanones, who was smitten by the woman who dared to fight a bull. "A German Gestapo agent was doing it," says the countess, who was dragged from the ring, trampled, after she knelt before the charging animal. "I wanted to show an American girl could do it."

It was during a trip to El Salvador several years ago, to prepare for one of her political lecture tours, that the countess encountered an agent from her past. Though she walked away, choosing to leave unanswered the frightening questions their espionage together had provoked, "The Spy Wore Red" took color.

Her life now is a study in contrasts.

Unlike the furnishings in her Manhattan apartment, the countess is unadorned. Sitting on her overstuffed sofa, she talks about having paid \$35 to have her taxes done at H&R Block. "All these little pieces of paper I finally got rid of," she says. "Not having lived here for 40 years, I didn't know how to fill out those damn things."

Then she recalls her trip to Geneva

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to bid on the jewels of her late good friend, the Duchess of Windsor. Though she didn't buy anything at the auction, the pair of diamond bracelets the duchess bequeathed to her are in her bank's safe-deposit box.

The socialite, who dines with the likes of the William F. Buckley's, is not afraid to let down her hair.

Pat Buckley, the countess' friend for more than 30 years, recalls Romanones leaping over a society dinner table and through a potted palm to greet a departing guest. Says the countess, "I can jump very high."

**H**ER LONG-TIME friend, author Dominick Dunne, knows the countess as the jogging-suited exerciser doing her daily race walk. "I keep reminding myself that her book isn't fiction," he says. "My God, this really happened to her," I think. Her book says one thing, her looks say another."

Looking at her in her apartment, surrounded by photos of her three sons and their families, it is easy to imagine her wearing Hattie Carnegie couture, hard to think of her holding a revolver. Until she talks.

For years, she has traveled to newer potential cauldrons like El Salvador, then returned to the States to lecture about them: the Marxist-Leninist threat to Spain; Central America's affect on U.S. destiny. "It's like taking salt out of food," she says. "The drive never leaves you."

So is the spy who wears red still spying?

"You have to use your imagination about that," the 64-year-old grandmother teases, wrapping her long, slim fingers around the teapot handle. "You have to just wonder. The answer, of course, is no."

*("The Spy Wore Red" will be excerpted in the Daily News Magazine Sunday, May 17.)*